

[Dust]

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[?] Story

Hilda Polacheck.

American Folk Stuff.

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DUST.

Jacob Saranoff worked in a rag-shop near Hull-House. He had come to Chicago from Russia in 1902, bringing his wife and two children with him. The family was met at the train by a relative who helped to find a home for them. They rented four rooms in a rear tenement on Halsted Street. After visiting several second hand furniture stores, the Saranoffs bought two second hand beds, a kitchen stove, a kitchen table and four chairs. They unpacked the bedding that they had brought with them from Russia and spent their first night in their first American home.

The next morning the children were enrolled in the public school. The first great ambition of Jacob and Sarah Saranoff had been realized. Their children were in school.

After paying a month's rent and the price of the furniture and the most necessary household utensils, Jacob had two dollars left. It was necessary for Jacob to take the first job that he could find. The job was sorting rags. His wages were eight dollars a week. The rent was six dollars a month. Jacob and Sarah decided that they could get along.

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The rag-shop was located in an abandoned barn. There was a small window in the rear of this barn which had been opened when the horses were housed in it. But since it had become a rag-shop, the window had been nailed up to keep out any possible thieves. Ventilation was not considered.

The floor of the rag-shop was never swept. The dust was allowed to gather day after day, week after week. But Jacob 2 paid no attention to the dust. His children were in school. They could not have gone to school in Russia. There were no schools for Jewish children in the village where he had lived. So why pay attention to dust?

Solomon, or Solly, as he was called, the older of the two children, wanted to learn to play the piano. But how does one get piano lessons and buy a piano on which to practice on eight dollars a week?

"Some day I will learn to play," Solly said. "All sorts of miracles happen in America. Maybe something will happen so that I can learn."

Solly was eight years old. His sister, Rosie, was six. They were learning American games. They now played hide and seek, run-sheep-run and peg, with the American born children. These American born children took Solly and Rosie to Hull-House.

The children ran up the stairs to a play-room in which there was a piano. It was the first time that Solly had been near a piano. He struck a note and was thrilled with the sound. He looked around, and no one seemed to mind his touching the piano. So he struck a few more notes. This was indeed a miracle! Such miracles could only happen in America, thought Solly.

When the play director entered to organize some games for the children. Patrick Ryan, who lived across the hall from the Saranoff family, took Solly to her.

"This is Solly," said Patrick "He's daffy about piano."

“Would you like to learn to play?” asked the director.

“Oh, yes! Could I?” Solly asked eagerly.

So Solly started to take piano lessons and he was allowed to come to Hull-House to practice.

Jacob had now been sorting rags for three years. He had been inhaling the dust for the same length of time. He would have liked to find other work. Something more interesting——something that would pay a little more money. He began to dream of the possibility of buying a piano for Solly. But he was afraid to take a day off to look for a better job. He was afraid he might lose the one he had. He could not risk having the family go without food. And there were shoes to buy. And the rent had to be paid. So he continued to sort rags, paying no attention to the dust on the floor. It was bad when the bales of rags were dumped on the floor and the dust rose and filled the room. The men who were sorting rags would get coughing spells when that happened. But the dust was soon settled, and the men went on sorting rags.

The Saranoff children were bringing good reports from school. Solly could now play the piano well. He was told at school that he would be allowed to play a solo when he graduated.

Solly found out that fathers and mothers could go to lectures and concerts at Hull-House. So on Sunday afternoon or evening, the Saranoffs listened to lectures they did not understand and to concerts that they did understand and loved. They found out that they could learn English, so they hurried through with the supper 4 dishes and became members of the English class. One evening, Mrs. Ryan, their neighbor, took Jacob and Sarah to a Hull-House party. At this party they met Jane Addams.

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"Miss Addams," said Jacob one night while he was at Hull-House," do you know that I have never heard Solly play the piano."

"Well, that is too bad," said Jane Addams. "I must see that you hear him soon."

A week later Solly brought home a card announcing a piano recital to be given by Solomon Saranoff, at the Hull-House Music School.

There were about fifty people present at Solly's first recital. The Ryans were there. Sarah Saranoff had invited Mrs. Schultz, her German neighbor who lived on the floor above. The Molinari family, whose son was learning to play the violin at Hull-House, were there. Just before the recital started, Jane Addams came into the room and sat down next to Jacob Saranoff.

Solly played with a delicacy and warmth that made him a part of the piano. When the first piece was finished, the tears were rolling down Jacob's cheeks. Solly played and Jacob's heartbeats accompanied him. He was thanking God for America—for Hull-House— for Jane Addams.

"For the last number," the piano teacher announced, "Solly will play a piece that he wrote. I am very proud of Solly, for it is not often that a child of his age can compose music. I think Solly will be a great musician."

Solly played his composition. It was a haunting little 5 melody. There was a little of the Russian persecution in it. There was a little of the joy of Hull-House. There was a little of the dust of the rag-shop.

The concert was over. The entire audience surrounded the Saranoff family. Jane Addams invited everybody into the coffee-house for refreshments.

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The dream of buying a piano now became an obsession with Jacob. He had heard one of the men who worked in the rag-shop, say that his two brothers were coming from Russia and that they would be looking for a place to live. The idea came to Jacob that he could rent one of the bedrooms to these two men. He broached the subject to Sarah. She thought it would be a good idea. Sarah had heard that pianos could be bought on easy payments. Perhaps she could get enough from the man to make the payments on a piano.

The boarders moved into one of the two bedrooms. A shiny new piano was moved into the bare parlor. A relative gave the family a discarded cot which was put into the parlor. On this Solly slept. Rosie was moved into the bedroom where her parents slept. Her bed was made up of the four chairs.

Solly practiced every minute that he could spare from his school work. He had graduated from grammar school and had entered high school.

Jacob went on sorting rags. But the sorting was now accompanied by the tunes that Solly played. Jacob noticed that he would get very tired, long before the day was over. He coughed a good deal when the bales of rags were damped on the floor. He would sweat during the night, even when the bedroom was very cold. But he said nothing to his wife.

Solly was ready to graduate from high school. He was to play one of his own compositions at the graduation exercises. This graduation was another event in the life of the Saranoff family. Jacob was proud of his tall, dark haired son, who was loudly applauded by the audience. Solly bowed again and again. Jacob thought: if only the cough did not bother him; he would be the happiest man in the world. But the cough did bother him.

Jacob would have liked to stay in bed the morning after the graduation. But a man had been fired the week before for staying home one day. So he dragged himself out of the bed and went to the rag-shop. Several hours later he was brought home by two men. They said that Jacob had started to cough and had spit large chunks of blood.

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"Yes, the dust in the rag-shop is bad," said one of the men.

Sarah was panic stricken. The neighbors called a doctor from the health department. A week later, Jacob was dead.

The relatives and neighbors collected money for the funeral. Solly did not quite realize what had happened. He sat between his mother and Jane Addams. He heard the Rabbi say:

"Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was:"

But the day after the funeral, Solly knew that he was now the head of the family. The owner of the rag-shop offered him a job as bookkeeper and Solly took it. He earned more money than his father had earned. But the dust was on the floor of the office.

Solly continued to take lessons at Hull-House in the evening, when he was not too tired. He had very little time to practice, now. After nine hours in the dirty office, weighing bales of rags, keeping books, haggling with the people who were selling the rags, he was too tired to practice.

Sarah was sorry that he could not go on with his music, but the rent had to be paid, food had to be bought, shoes did wear out.

One morning Solly noticed several people from Hull-House walk into the rag-shop. They spoke to one of the men in the shop; they gathered some of the dust from the floor into small white papers, and left.

That night Solly went to Hull-House. He found Jane Addams and asked about the dust that had been gathered.

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"We are trying to find out whether the dust contains any tuberculosis germs," Jane Addams told him.

"Dust——- tuberculosis," said Solly in a bewildered tone. "Every other house on the block has some one sick with tuberculosis. I heard an old woman say that a dybbuk¹ has attacked the neighborhood. Perhaps it is a dybbuk! Perhaps there is a dybbuk in the dust that my father breathed into his lungs. Whis I have been breathing into my lungs. The dybbuk always kills the person it attacks!"

1 An evil spirit.

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Solly was hysterical! He was taken to a room and a doctor was called. The doctor looked very grave. Solly's temperature was quite high. The doctor was sure he had tuberculosis. He had been working too hard. He had been inhaling the dust from the rag-shop.

Sarah was like a stone image when she was told.

"Thank God you will take care of him," she said to Jane Addams. "Rosie will now have to go to work. I wanted her to finish high school."

Solly was well cared for in a sanitarium which Jane Addams had helped to create. As he lay on his cot on the sun-porch, he was putting notes together that he would fashion into songs, when he got well.

At Hull-House a fight was going on to bring air into dark homes. Shorter working hours — less fatigue—less tuberculosis. Court proceedings were started to have the barn that housed the rag-shop, condemned. It took months to accomplish this. But the rag-shop was condemned.

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Jane Addams travelled all the way to the sanitarium to tell Solly the news. But he was too ill to be told that the dust had at last been removed. He had become a part of the dust.